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Preacher of the Advent-1

By C. MERVYN MAXWELL

February 15, 1982, marks the bicentennial of the birth of William Miller.

William Miller was a person well worth knowing. He was a success at almost everything he put his hand to. He was a careful student, a clear writer, an effective persuader, and a very attractive person. People who did not know him personally sometimes made fun of him, but those who knew him well respected him highly.

As regards his characteristic teachings about the 2300 days, the Second Coming, and 1844, Miller was unquestionably honest and sincere. And on most of his characteristic points, he was right. It can be said, in fact, that in the interpretation of prophecy William Miller was the most nearly right man in all the world at the time. It is no wonder that God called him to "tell it to the world!"

It is no wonder, either, that Miller for many years refused to preach. A man such as he was wise enough to fear he might be wrong.

This year, 1982, is Miller's bicentennial, for he was born 200 years ago, on February 15, 1782. That was only four months after Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington at Yorktown. It was only 21 months after the Dark Day of May 19, 1780. It was less than five years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Between the signing of the Declaration and the birth of William Miller, his parents saw the Revolutionary War inflate the cost of bread flour to 20 times what it had been before.

First of 16 children

The future founder of the great Second Advent awakening in America first saw the light of day on a farmstead near the village of Pittsfield in western Massachusetts. When he was 4, his father and mother decided to seek a more productive farm for their rapidly growing family. (William was the first of 16 children.) They picked up their belongings and headed about 75 miles north and a few miles west to open up a new place in Low Hampton, New York. Low Hampton is a low-lying area in Hampton township a short distance from Lake Champlain. Lake Champlain is a long, narrow body of water reaching down from Canada to the Hudson Valley. The Hudson Valley, of course, reaches down to New York City.

Early in the Revolutionary War the British had sent soldiers down the shore of Lake Champlain under orders to reach New York City and divide the American colonies in two. They were stopped short at Saratoga. They would try again during the War of 1812. And they would fail again, at the

Battle of Plattsburgh, on September 11, 1814. This second British failure would lead to William Miller's conversion. His conversion would lead to his Bible study. His Bible study would lead to the Second Advent awakening. And to 1844.

But for now these developments were still future. Little William needed time first of all to grow up.

William soon turned into a fine, husky lad who needed little sleep at night in order to work hard all day. He developed the habit of reading for hours, Lincoln-style, by the light of flaming pitch knots when the other members of the family were in bed. He borrowed books, serious ones mostly, from people miles around.

Bible seemed full of contradictions

For a few years as a boy Miller worried about his soul, but religion did not seem to help him much, and to him the Bible seemed full of contradictions.

In 1803, aged 21, Miller married Lucy Smith and settled in Poultney Township, a few miles east across the Vermont State line. Lucy did many of the farm chores so her new husband could find extra time to study. He quickly exhausted the local library and began again to seek books from whoever had any. Sociable and energetic as well as studious, he was successively elected constable, deputy sheriff, and justice of the peace. Soon he was wealthy enough to own two horses, wise enough to have close friendships in both political parties of the day—and worldly enough to give up his boyhood faith, such as it was, and become a deist.

Deism was the religion of America's founding fathers. It held that God created the world and set in operation unalterable laws of cause and effect. In harmony with these laws, people ought to live clean, kindly, and honest lives; but to believe in prayer or a Saviour was regarded as superstitious. Not Christianity but decent, law-and-order Americanism would bring out the best in a person, Miller concluded; and his house became a regular meeting place for the patriotic but not particularly pious couples of his new hometown.

Miller's Grandfather Phelps on his mother's side and his Uncle Elihu on his father's side were Baptist ministers. From time to time these dedicated men made efforts to reach his soul. William welcomed them warmly to his home, but after they left he mimicked them mischievously, to the huge enjoyment of his friends.

Convinced that "love of country—PATRIOTISM" (as he once expressed it) rather than love for Christ was humanity's greatest hope, Miller volunteered for Army service in the War of 1812. Forty-seven other men also volunteered, on condition that they be permitted to serve under his command. A natural leader, Miller was commissioned first as a lieutenant and soon after as a captain.

Thus Miller became involved in the Battle of Plattsburgh on the western shore of Lake Champlain. On the morning of

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September 11, 1814, the British committed 15,000 veterans (from the successful war with Napoleon) against 5,500 inexperienced American soldiers, gloomily certain of defeat.

The outcome was a total surprise.

"Sir: It is over! it is done!" Captain Miller reported at two-twenty that afternoon in a letter to a friend. "The British" have "struck to the American flag! . . . This morning, at ten o'clock, the British opened a very heavy and destructive fire upon us. . . . I am satisfied that I can fight; I know I am no coward. . . . Three of my men are wounded—by a shell which burst within two feet of me. . . . Huzza! huzza!"

Discharged in 1815 at the age of 33, Miller moved his family back to Low Hampton, paid off the mortgage on his mother's farm (his father having died in 1812), and settled on 200 acres nearby.

But as Miller returned to the serenity of farming, his mind probed restlessly into the religion of the patriots. By the law of cause and effect, he reasoned, the victory at Plattsburgh ought to have gone to the British. And what about the shell that exploded at his feet without hurting him or killing his friends? *Was there a God who cared?*

Especially troublesome was the low morality of the men who had served under his command. Love of country seemed to have brought out the worst in them, not the best.

And in himself? A year or so after his discharge Miller caught himself swearing—like any other soldier. A Thanksgiving sermon in September, 1816, on the second anniversary of Plattsburgh sent him home bathed in tears. The following Sunday, in the minister's absence, the deacons asked him to read a printed sermon. He had read other sermons on other Sundays. But this one, "The Importance of Parental Duties," required parents to conduct family worship and to set a good example spiritually. Too honest to teach what he did not do, Miller sat down in the middle of the sermon, deeply moved.

Despair over sins

In despair over his sins, Miller imagined how good it would be to throw himself into the arms of a Saviour and trust completely in His grace. But did such a Being exist?

To the Bible he went; and within its covers he found the very Saviour whom he sought. "I was constrained to admit that the Scriptures must be a revelation from God," he wrote later. "They became my delight, and in Jesus I found a friend."

It deserves repeated emphasis that before Miller found the 2300 days he found Christ. The 2300 days became of vital interest to him because they seemed to say something wonderful about Jesus.

But before Miller found the 2300 days, he began regular family worship. His worldly friends, meanwhile, made fun of him now as previously he himself had made fun of other

Christians. "How do you know the Bible is the Word of God?" they teased. "What about its contradictions?"

Miller responded staunchly that if the Bible really is the Word of God, given for people to understand, it should solve its own problems. He promised that, given time, he would harmonize its apparent contradictions or "be a deist still."

Laying aside every book except the Bible and *Cruden's Concordance*, he began with the first verse of Genesis 1 and advanced no more quickly than he could handle the difficulties that arose.

One by one, most of the Bible's seemingly insoluble inconsistencies faded away. Best of all, he found that Jesus, his loving Friend and Saviour, had promised to come again to earth! And one day he came across the text that was to mark him for the rest of his life—Daniel 8:14: "Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed."

Startling conclusion

After two years of almost undeviating concentration, Miller came to the startling conclusion that the 2300 days would end, the judgment would convene, and Christ would return "about the year 1843" (later revised to 1844).

It was now 1818. If the world was to end within 25 years, people ought to be told about it. A voice burned into his soul, "Go and tell the world."

For five years Miller brushed aside the call and vigorously analyzed his position. He was afraid, he wrote later, "lest by some possibility I should be in error, and be the means of misleading any." When, however, his doubts were removed by these five years of research, fear of public speaking took their place. "I told the Lord that . . . I had not the necessary qualifications . . . , that I was very diffident and feared to go before the world."

Miller filled an increasingly active role in his local church, and he shared his convictions about the coming of Christ with acquaintances and correspondents. But nothing could satisfy the persistent summons to *preach*.

On a Saturday morning in August, 1831, after 13 of the 25 years had already passed, Miller finally and reluctantly promised the Lord that he would preach about the Second Coming—but only if someone would give him an invitation to do so.

He concluded his prayer cheerfully, quite certain that no such invitation would be provided.

But within an hour one of his nephews showed up unexpectedly, a son of one of his 11 sisters. To Miller's horror, he carried a startling request. "Uncle William," he said—in some such words as these—"our Baptist minister in Dresden is unable to speak at services tomorrow. Father wants you to come and talk about the second coming of Christ. Will you come?" □

To be concluded